

Bob -

I continue to
worry about
bias in estimates -
Hence this
dissertation -

John -

27 May 1981

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Central Intelligence

FROM: John A. Bross

SUBJECT: Estimating Process

1. The habit of attributing thoughts, motives, fears and asperations to national entities has developed into an obsession and seems to me to confuse rather than clarify judgments about intentions of foreign countries, hostile or otherwise. Statements such as "Castro believes" or "as the Soviets see it" or "the Soviets perceive their interests," etc. suggest an insight into the determinants of Soviet policymaking for which there is little substantiating evidence.

2. There is certainly a need for careful analysis of the sources of Soviet policy and a vigorous effort to identify and evaluate the motives, apprehensions and asperations that appear to determine the course of Soviet decisions. An examination of this sort, however, involves insights of a highly speculative nature. The prejudices, experience and peer influences that consolidate or divide judgments as between various groups and elements at the decisionmaking levels of Soviet or other national governments are not all that easy to sort out. History suggests that the process through which most national policies are established is full of ambiguities, uncertainties and contradictions.

3. A particularly perceptive assessment of the various influences that, to a greater or lesser degree, determine the course of Soviet policy is provided in an essay by Seweryn Bialer in a recent article, "Soviet Foreign Policy: Sources, Perceptions, Trends." Bialer analyzes the tensions, conflicts and cross-pressures which affect political thinking in the Soviet Union including the interrelationship between ideological and national traditions. He arrives at an order of priorities which he believes discernible from the conduct of Soviet policy. Amongst priorities which he characterizes as "absolute" he identifies "security of the Soviet home base" and "Soviet dominance in Eastern Europe." A second group of priorities includes "the goal of enhancing Soviet political influence in the international arena" and "the economic goals of developing the inflow of technology from industrialized capitalistic countries, of securing agricultural imports and of obtaining credits from the West."

4. He concludes with the following: "The difficulties in U.S.-Soviet relations do not have as their source mutual misperceptions of the two powers by each other. At the heart of the conflict is the real diversity of their interests, a real difference in their evaluation and perception of the international situation, a real diversity of their priorities in approaching the world system, and a real asymmetry in the development of their international appetites and their consciousness of what is possible and obtainable for their respective countries in the international arena."

5. Bialer's analysis is reminiscent of Khrushchev's statement to Eisenhower at Camp David at their meeting in 1959(?) when asked by the President whether a settlement of Soviet-U.S. controversies should not be attempted on the basis of the status quo. Khrushchev agreed but went on to define the status quo as a situation in which the forces of communism and socialist enlightenment were constantly expanding and the forces of capitalistic imperialism were constantly shrinking.

6. Although we are safe in assuming that Soviet policy is expansionistic, the specific motives that inspire specific policies are likely to be and remain enigmatic. It is important therefore that our assumptions about Soviet objectives and goals should be recognized for what they are--assumptions--and that they should be as realistic as possible.

7. The Nitze exercise is designed to help us make an assumption about Soviet military planning more realistic by giving us a better basis for understanding the Soviet estimate of American capabilities. It should provide a better understanding of the Soviet attitude towards warfighting but is unlikely to result in a very clear understanding of specific Soviet military intentions. It should, however, clarify our assumptions about the degree to which the Soviets are likely to resort to a serious threat of military action to support political objectives.

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12. The only (and not very profound) points that I am trying to make are: first that there should be a conclusion. (Bob Gates has said this very clearly in an earlier memorandum.) Secondly, pronouncements predicated on essentially ideological or subjective attitudes of a speculative nature are really not an appropriate element for inclusion in an estimate. Obviously, conclusions about enemy intentions must rest on speculative evidence. Plausible assumptions about Soviet probable future conduct, for example, must be extrapolated from past experience, strategic or economic imperatives, political or territorial advantages, etc. What (again obviously) should be avoided are statements that say, or sound as though they were saying, on the one hand, "pursuant to their program for world domination the Soviets intend to do this" or, on the other hand, "influenced by their paranoic but genuine preoccupation with security the Soviets intend to do that." Either of these statements presuppose mind sets which are not likely to be disposed to an objective evaluation of available evidence.

13. As a practical matter neither of these statements is likely to appear in an intelligence document. However, there is plenty of evidence that bias continues to be a factor in the intelligence community.

14. Two things appear to me to be of paramount importance in the area of intelligence production. One is that the estimates should say something--even if it turns out to be wrong. A corollary of cardinal importance is that the estimates should avoid even the appearance of prejudice or bias. This town perennially seeths with gossip about the politization of estimates. At this moment, with a real effort afoot to make the estimates as hard hitting and incisive as possible, it seems to me particularly important that the language and the analytical postulates of the estimates should be as free as possible of indications of doctrinaire predispositions.

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